



MAKING AN ENTRANCE

by Barbara Kyle

First impressions are crucial. Your initial response when you meet a person gets imprinted in your mind and is hard to alter, and this is equally true of a reader's first impression of a character in fiction. Their response to the protagonist, in particular, is supremely important.

Yet new writers often waste this opportunity, introducing their protagonist in idleness or outright passivity. Be smart – put the visceral impact of the first impression to work for you.

Lights, Camera, Action

Think of your story as a movie, and your protagonist as the star, and give him or her a dynamic and meaningful entrance. Focus on two steps:

1. Determine the character's defining quality
2. Show that quality through action

Action is the key. Description of a character tells the reader mere facts – it has little visceral effect. Showing the character's defining quality through action produces an emotional response in the reader, leaving a deep and lasting effect.

Star Roles

Screenwriters do this very consciously. Watch any film that you like and notice how the scene in which the hero/heroine first comes on screen demonstrates their defining quality. In other words, it shows the character's essence.

When actors first read a script this “essence in action” is the very thing they look for. (I know – I made my living as an actor for twenty years.) As a writer of fiction you can use this screenwriting technique to good effect. Strive to write an entrance scene for your protagonist which, if your story were made into a film, would attract an A-list actor to the role – a star.

How It’s Done

Here are some examples of the kind of dynamic entrance I mean:

1. Meredith Stephure’s splendid and moving historical novel CIVIL BLOOD opens with Thomas de Chastelain, lawyer and loyalist, about to ride off to war, yet he takes a few minutes to deal with a small family crisis: his two bold young sons have trespassed on the neighbor’s property. We see Thomas take action, being strict but fair, and full of affection for his children. This is the essence of his character.
2. Ian McEwan’s brilliant novel ATONEMENT opens with Briony Tallis, as a precocious child, obsessing about the play she has written, and orchestrating her cousins to take the roles in her fictional world. Her need to control people, and her obsession with storytelling, are the essence of her character.
3. Lee Gowan’s novel CONFESSION shows Dwight Froese, a young janitor at an elementary school, breaking up a schoolyard fight between two boys by lifting the bully by the scuff of his shirt and calmly threatening him. Dwight’s action shows us a man who cares about justice but also has an aura of latent brutality.
4. My novel THE QUEEN’S LADY, set in Tudor England, opens with seven-year-old Honor Larke risking her life to try to find her servant-friend amid a May Day riot. After seeing the mob viciously attack a foreigner, Honor’s curiosity and pity drive her to help the dying stranger. This is her essence, shown in action.

Timing the Entrance

The examples above are all of opening scenes, but your opening doesn’t have to feature the protagonist. You may want to kick-start the story with some other event – for example, one featuring the antagonist. What’s important is that when

you do bring your protagonist on stage, give them an entrance in which the action they take resonates on a meaningful, emotional level with your reader.

Whether your hero/heroine is a rogue, a lost soul, a killer, or a saint, their entrance is your chance make them a star.



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Barbara teaches creative writing courses for the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, and her "Fiction Writer's Boot Camp" at the Haliburton School of The Arts, and has presented workshops for many writers organizations.

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Before becoming an author Barbara enjoyed a twenty-year acting career in television, film, and stage productions in Canada and the U.S.

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